

National Days of Remembrance

AMERICAN RESPONSES

There are a number of seminal events in Holocaust history that raise questions about the responses of the United States to the widespread persecution and mass murder of the Jews of Europe. Two of these times are the refugee crisis in the spring of 1939 and the deportation of Hungarian Jews five years later. What can we learn today from American action and inaction in the face of these events? What are the warning signs we should look for to help prevent future genocides? What is our responsibility as a nation or as individuals when confronted with such crimes?

In May 1939, a passenger liner carrying 937 people—almost all of them Jews fleeing Nazi persecution—left Hamburg, Germany, for Havana, Cuba. Those on board the ship, called the *St. Louis*, had landing permits to enter Cuba, but a Cuban law invalidated them before the ship arrived. After nearly all the passengers were refused entry upon arrival, the *St. Louis* sailed along the coast of Florida, within sight of the lights of Miami, while those on board desperately sought permission to land in the United States. This was just less than three months before World War II began, when many lives could have been saved. Media on both sides of the Atlantic brought attention to the refugees' plight, and some passengers cabled President Franklin D. Roosevelt asking for help. There was no response.

US immigration policies at the time made it very difficult for refugees to enter the country, in part because Americans were afraid the newcomers would take away their jobs. The captain of the *St. Louis* returned to Europe, where all passengers—save one—were admitted as temporary refugees by Great Britain, France, Holland, and Belgium. Most of them were trapped by the German invasion in spring 1940; 254 died in the Holocaust. One such passenger was Julius Hermanns, who was residing in France when the Germans invaded. After Germany occupied France, French authorities detained Julius in several concentration camps, and the SS deported him to Auschwitz-Birkenau, where he was murdered. His experience was not uncommon.

In the spring of 1944, the Jews of Budapest also faced almost certain death at Auschwitz-Birkenau. Until then, the Hungarian government, while subjecting them to discrimination and persecution, had refused to permit deportation of Hungarian Jews to the killing centers. They were the only large Jewish community in Central Europe still intact. After Germany occupied Hungary in March 1944, newly installed Hungarian authorities concentrated and deported around 440,000 Jews to Auschwitz-Birkenau on more than 145 train transports between May and July. By mid-July, the only Jews left in Hungary were in Budapest.

Americans could not claim ignorance of the murder of Hungary's Jews. The US government had received official reports 18 months earlier of the "Final Solution," the Nazi plan to kill all European Jews, and newspaper articles in the spring of 1944 told of "huge gas chambers arranged for mass murder."¹ Behind the headlines and reports were the fates of individuals like 38-year-old Ilona Kalman and her daughter Judith. In June 1944, Ilona and Judith were both deported from Hungary to Auschwitz where, upon arrival, SS authorities selected Judith for forced labor and killed Ilona in the gas chamber.

News about the annihilation of European Jews spurred some Americans to take action. John Pehle, for example, was a 34-year-old lawyer at the US Treasury Department. He was deeply troubled by both the news from Europe and his discovery that State Department officials were deliberately downplaying information about the "Final Solution." So he wrote a report to Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau urging intervention and warning that if immediate steps were not taken to protect Jews, the US government "will have to share for all time the responsibility for this extermination."

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In response to this report, in January 1944 President Roosevelt named Pehle the head of the newly established War Refugee Board, tasked with the “immediate rescue and relief of the Jews of Europe and other victims of enemy persecution.” In this role, Pehle tried tirelessly to save Jews in Hungary and elsewhere in Europe. Today the Board is credited with saving some 200,000 lives during the Holocaust, including tens of thousands of Jews in Budapest. Nevertheless, acknowledging the enormity of human loss in the Holocaust, Pehle could not hide his frustration in summarizing the board’s impact as “late and little.”

These examples from the Holocaust encourage reflection on contemporary cases of genocide, such as the Rwandan genocide in 1994. Despite warnings of imminent violence made by Canadian General Roméo Dallaire, the head of the UN Assistance Mission for Rwanda, the world failed to act and some 800,000 people were murdered within 100 days. President Bill Clinton later reflected on the US government’s failure to respond: “If we’d gone in sooner, I believe we could have saved at least a third of the lives that were lost...it had an enduring impact on me.”

As long as genocide remains a threat, we must continue to ask ourselves about the consequences of action—and of inaction. That is how we strive to fulfill the promise of Never Again.

¹ “Jews in Hungary Fear Annihilation,” *New York Times*, Wednesday, May 10, 1944.